


BUDDHIST ATTITUDE TOWARDS OTHER RELIGIONS

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 he aim of this article is to assist in promoting a better understanding of religion, religious tolerance and its deep underlying meaning from the Buddhist point of view and to understand how Buddhism regards other religions.

The deep underlying meaning of religion is to be able to uphold and respect one's own religion without in any way being disrespectful or discourteous towards other religions. To this end, we must establish mutual understanding, mutual co-operation and tolerance amongst all co-religionists in order to achieve religious harmony.

People always talk of religious tolerance and its importance but few, if any, ever pin-point a practical way in order to achieve this religious tolerance. It is to be hoped that in perusing this article, the reader would be

able to obtain a clearer picture of religious tolerance and would endeavour to promote religious tolerance. We should try to eradicate our so-called superiority complex, our mutual suspicion, our religious prejudice and our selfish motives, for the common good and upliftment of our respective religions. Therefore religious understanding is far better than religious tolerance.

Therefore, religious understanding is far better than religious tolerance, All fellow-religionists are working for the common cause of human emancipation and enlightenment. The search for emancipation and enlightenment is the search for Truth. Unfortunately, in our very midst, there are many ludicrous religious practices and beliefs which are depicted or passed off as the Truth, when in fact they are far from being the Truth. As true religious followers we must have the courage and conviction to admit what is evidently a misconception and try to rectify it to conform to science and reasoning to meet the requirements of Truth. We would be failing in our duty if we try to cling on to something which we know is not the Truth. We are even wrong, if in the practice of our religious tolerance, we tolerate it without pointing out its failings or inadequacies which do not conform to Truth. In seeking Truth we should discard our competitive attitudes and unite to work hand-in-hand to achieve our noble aim of religious harmony for the well-being of mankind.

Although the Buddha pointed out that there was no religious value in many of the practices in India during

his time, He had the courtesy to advise his followers to give alms or food to the Brahmins and other mendicants and to support them irrespective of their religion. The Buddha advised his followers not to hurt or to cause injury to a *Sramana* (monk) or a Brahmin. Here He has accommodated monks and Brahmins as religious people. Again the Buddha said that when a person deceives a Brahmin or a monk or pauper, by telling a lie, this is a cause of the downfall of the person. Thus in advising his followers in this manner the Buddha has treated all of them without any discrimination.

The aim of Buddhism is to guide everyone to lead a noble life without harming anyone, to cultivate humane qualities in order to maintain human dignity, to radiate all-embracing kindness without any discrimination, to train the mind to avoid evil and to purify the mind to gain peace and happiness.

Buddhism is a religion which teaches people to "live and let live". In the history of the world, there is no evidence to show that Buddhists have interfered or done any damage to any other religion in any part of the world for the purpose of propagating their religion. Buddhists do not regard the existence of other religions as a hindrance to worldly progress and peace.

The Buddha's message was an invitation to all to join the fold of universal brotherhood to work in strength and harmony for the welfare and happiness of mankind. He had no chosen people, and He did not regard himself as the chosen one.

The Buddha's first missionaries were *Arahantas* – the Perfect and Holy Ones. They were noble human beings who by the sheer effort of their renunciation and mental training had gained Perfection. Before sending out these disciples, He had advised them in the following manner:

“Go ye, O Bhikkhus, and wander forth for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, in compassion for the world; for the good, for the gain, for the welfare of gods and men. Proclaim, O Bhikkhus, the sublime doctrine, preach ye a life of holiness, perfect and pure.”

According to this advice, the Buddha wanted to tell the people the difference between good and evil; He wanted to teach man how to lead a happy, peaceful and righteous way of life. He never advised his disciples to convert people from one religion to another. His idea of conversion was to introduce a righteous, noble and religious way of life.

The Buddha did not criticise or condemn any religion other than to enlighten the people by showing them the futility of going into the extremes of self-mortification (or self-torture) and self-indulgence (or sensuality) and to avoid superstitious and meaningless practices in the name of religion.

The True Religion

On the question of what constitutes a true religion, the Buddha has given a liberal answer, stating that wherever the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble

Eight fold Paths could be found, and where one can find genuine followers who have gained spiritual development, therein lies the true religion. He did not say that Buddhism is the only true religion in this world, but exhorted man to accept and respect truth wherever truth was to be found. This means that we need not ignore the reasonable teachings of the other religions. Such an attitude clearly shows that the Buddha never had any prejudice towards other religions, nor did he try to monopolise religious truth. He wanted to point out only one thing – the Truth, and all his teachings are based on the Four Noble Truths – that of **suffering** or unsatisfactoriness, its **cause**, its **cessation** and the **way** leading to its cessation.

Whenever the Buddha advised his disciples to act on or keep away from something, He always asked them to do so, not only for their own welfare and happiness, but also for the welfare and happiness of others. He said, “If it is good for you and others, then do it; on the other hand, if it is bad for you and for others, do not do it.”

As a social reformer, the Buddha discovered the deepest roots of human sorrow – Greed, hatred and delusion, which are deeply rooted in man’s mind. Therefore it is only through man’s mind that true reform can be effected. Reforms imposed upon the external world by force can only last for a short while, but those that spring from the transformation of man’s inner consciousness are more durable.

The evil tendencies towards greed, hatred and

delusion must eventually be overcome and substituted by the forces of generosity, loving-kindness and wisdom. It is only through such mental purification that peace and happiness can be effectively brought about through religion.

Buddhism became the first missionary religion the world has seen. Nearly two thousand three hundred years ago, through the noble efforts of Emperor Asoka who ruled India – (305 B.C. – 268 B.C.) and who at the height of his thirst for worldly power, renounced the sword of violence, devoted much of his time for the upliftment of Buddhism and Buddhist culture. He sent out Buddhist missionaries, including his own son and daughter throughout the entire country of the then known world, to convey the peace message of the Buddha. True to the noble tradition of the Buddha, he never forgot to advise these missionaries not to condemn or to run down any other religion while they preached Buddhism. This advice was engraved on an Asoka pillar in Brahmi characters – the ruins of which can still be seen today at Sarnath, Benares in India.

The following statements in the Edict says:-

“One should not honour only one’s own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should honour others’ religion for this or that reason. In so doing, one helps one’s own religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise one digs the grave of one’s own religion and also does harm to other religions. Whosoever honours his own religions,

and condemns other religions, does so indeed through devotion to his own religions, thinking “I will glorify my own religion,” But on the contrary, in so doing he injures his own religion more gravely. So concord is good: “Let all listen, and be willing to listen to the doctrines professed by others.”

The people of Asia have much cause to be grateful to this great monarch. As a ruler he did his duty to support every existing religion without any discrimination.

Religious Harmony

Religious principles are intended for the whole of mankind. If any particular section of humanity does not follow the great virtues taught by religion – such as kindness, patience, tolerance and understanding, it would be difficult for others to live peacefully.

It is quite natural for cunning and selfish people to take advantage of any kind of virtue, but, let all religionists of today, bear in mind, that those who fight and shed blood in the name of religion, do not follow religious principles and do not serve the cause of humanity. They fight for their own personal gain or power by using the name of a religion. Those who truly practise a religion have no grounds to fight, they should settle their problems in a peaceful manner. A true religion never encourages any form of violence under any circumstances. At the same time, racial discrimination should not arise when we practise our respective religions. Buddhists can live and work with other religionists without any hostility.

Not only that, Buddhists had never shed blood amongst their different denominations or with other religions for the sake of religion..

Today because of the atrocities that have been done and are still continuing to be done (to some extent) in the name of religion, many people have become disillusioned at the mention of the very word, “religion”. Materialism, hypocrisy and fanaticism masquerading under the guise of religion have caused the greatest catastrophies in the history of mankind. The true religious values are rapidly disappearing from the minds of men as they run in search of the occult and the mystical. The established great religions of the world are breaking into myriads of forms; and some people are even going all out to ridicule religion. The time has come for religionists of today to get together to introduce religious values in its proper perspective, instead of merely arguing and quarrelling over the differences of religious ideologies and mythologies.

Religion should not be confined to worshipping and praying only. Religion is not a means for lip service only but a practical medium for man to act harmlessly, to be of service to mankind, to be good and to gain liberation, peace and real happiness.

Different religions may have different beliefs and views regarding the beginning and the end of life, as well as different interpretations regarding the ultimate salvation. But we should not bring forward such discordant issues to create conflict, confrontation, clashes,

hatred and misunderstanding.

There are more than enough common virtues for religionists to introduce in theory and practice in the name of religion, so that people may lead a righteous, peaceful and cultured way of life.

There is no need for us to belittle and castigate one another. If we do so, we would only pave the way for the anti-religious groups who are waiting to ridicule and condemn all religions. We should not behave in such a way as to show our hostile attitude to our co-religionists. If we do so, people will say that religions encourage mankind to be divided.

Buddhists are not forbidden to give due respect to other religious teachers, nor are they restricted to visiting places of worship and attending religious services, other than Buddhism. They can show their full cooperation while maintaining their basic Buddhist principles.

Buddhism encourages cooperation and understanding amongst the various religious denominations. From the Buddhist point of view, religious labels are not the most important aspect for people to be considered religious, but a person leading a respectable and harmless way of life can be regarded as religious.

Those who find faults and criticise Buddhism can only do so at a very superficial level. They may criticise the traditional practices, the manners and customs, but not the Teachings as established by the Buddha; as these principles are good for all time. They can be tried out by

any one who wishes to test them.

The methods used to introduce the teachings of the Buddha are peaceful and reasonable. The Buddha made his appeal through reason and experience. The teachings were presented with clear and impressive simplicity, and yet kept free from religious and national narrowness and fanaticism. They have produced clear and sober-minded people. This method of presentation cleared doubts and removed superstitious beliefs. Thus did the teachings of the Buddha convince the hearts and minds of the earnest seekers of truth. The Buddhist attitude of tolerance and understanding convinced many great thinkers, philosophers, rationalists, free-thinkers and even agnostics to appreciate Buddhism as a peaceful way of life.

According to the Buddha, men are divided among themselves because of their strong egoism. When this is subdued, healthy human relationships will develop. The search for peace and a harmonious way of life, therefore begins from within and not from the outside.

If the religionists of today cannot get together to work in harmony without discrimination or hostility towards one another, the peace that we talk of would only remain as a dream.

As sincere and true co-religionists, let us join hands to consolidate our efforts to eradicate all that which are controversial and discriminatory in our teachings and do our utmost to introduce spiritual values which are common in our respective religions for the good and

well-being of all mankind, irrespective of race or creed. We should all remember that religion exists for the good of mankind and that it should not be misused fanatically in any way for personal gain or self-glorification.

Unite Together

Let all religionists unite not to use religious militarism. Let them unite to stop all the brutality and manslaughter in the name of war. Let them unite to give freedom to man to find a religion according to his own conviction. Let them unite to give up religious monopoly. Let them unite not to use religion in the market place to convert others by adopting questionable methods. Let them unite to respect the other man's religious beliefs and practices as long as these beliefs and practices are harmless and do not mislead the public. Let them unite to wipe out the challenging attitude of unhealthy religious competition, let all religionists unite to eliminate the various vices and immoral practices that are common in our modern society. Let them also unite to introduce the moderate way of life amongst their followers and advise them not to go to extremes.

The founders of each religion had as their basic aim the unity of mankind – to foster harmony, goodwill and understanding among all the people of the world.

Following in their footsteps various religious leaders have also sought to develop this deep respect for the beliefs of other people. Unfortunately, however, certain followers of every religion, for their own selfish

reasons and due to their intolerance and narrow-mindedness, have gone against the real essence of Religion and have created chaos, misconception, discrimination and intolerance.

We earnestly hope that by realizing these facts, mankind will one day unite as religious brothers to work for the well-being of all.

In the final analysis, respect for the religion of another person springs from the confidence one has in the intrinsic strength of his own religion. ■